

Does Access to Higher Education for Youth Enhance Sustainable Development in Africa? Some Empirical Lessons from Kogi State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

It has been universally acknowledged and empirically proven that education is a catalyst for development. Higher education has been recognized as a prerequisite for eliminating poverty and to achieve sustainable development. In Nigeria, higher educational sector are confronted with multi-faceted problems such as poor funding, unstable curriculum, poor infrastructure, insufficient academic staff and so forth. While a number of private institutions have emerged to expand access to higher education across the nation, the high cost of schooling in private institutions has further led to the exclusion of youth from poor economic background. The study recommended the need for workable intervention programmes in a way that would increase access for youth irrespective of their socio-economic background.

Key words: Access; Higher education; sustainable development; youth; Nigeria and Africa

INTRODUCTION

In Sub-Saharan Africa, higher education has been recognized as a necessity to an investment in human capital and economic development for both youth and the entire society (State of Education in Africa Report, 2015). More importantly, education has been identified as fundamental to the attainment of sustainable development in Africa and

various governments and international bodies have focus attention on the realization of 'education for sustainable development' (Mohamedbhai, 2015:1).

Essentially, studies have observed that higher education has increased the rates of employment opportunities and job prospects, improved quality of life, economic growth and development (ibid). Moreover the connection between higher institutions' roles and the realization of desirable social change and sustainability of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) has been well established. For example, some stakeholders in education such as commonwealth has identified the important roles of higher education sectors in terms of teaching, research and engagement capacities as sine qua non to achieving sustainable development in Africa (Roberts and Ajai-Ajagbe, 2013). As commonwealth Sectary-General asserts, "the sustainable achievement of each of the eight MDGs remains dependent in part on contributions from higher education sector" (Roberts and Ajai-Ajagbe, 2013:3). Similarly, a UNESCO report (2008) clearly indicated that, the National Economic Empowerment Strategies (NEEDS) that was established for wealth creation, poverty reduction and value creation can only be pursued, achieved and sustained through a well functional and effective educational system (*see also*, Omoriege, 2010). However, one of the challenges that appear to have slow down the continent's path to structural transformation and sustainable economy is the limited access to higher education for youth who are indisputably the future of any nation.

Despite the tremendous benefits that accompany education in Africa, the numbers of youth that have access to higher institution are still limited. For instance in Nigeria, a study conducted on need to ascertain access to higher education revealed that out of the total population applying for higher education admission between 2003 and 2012, only candidates between 13.12% and 26.52% succeeded in gaining admission

to either Universities, Polytechnics or Colleges of Education, while a high number of 73.48% to 86.88 are denied admissions to either of the higher institutions (Kpolovie and Obilor, 2013).

Similarly as observed by Aluede et al., (2012) only about 5.2% to 15.3% of number of candidates that apply to Nigeria Federal and State Universities are admitted every year, leaving out as many as 84.7% to 94.8% of the candidates being denied access. Table 1.0 below shows the total number of Universities applications and admission between 1999 - 2009.

Table 1.0: Nigeria Higher Education system

S/N	YEAR	NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS	NUMBER ADMITTED	NUMBER DENIED ADMISSION
1	1999/2000	417,773	78,550	339,223
2	2000/2001	467,90	50,227	417,213
3	2001/2002	550,399	60,718	544,321
4	2002/2003	994,380	51,845	942,535
5	2003/2004	1,046,950	105,157	941,793
6	2004/2005	841,878	122,492	719,386
7	2005/2006	916,371	N/A	N/A
8	2006/2007	803,472	123,626	579,846
9	2007/2008	1,054,053	19,521	859,532
10	2008/2009	1,182,381	N/A	N/A
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X	2012/2013	1,503,9	N/A	N/A

Source: Ajadi, (2012) cited in Iruonagbe et al., (2015)

From the above data, it can be deduced that a large number of youth in African settings and particularly in Nigeria still miss out of opportunities to acquire human capital which symbolizes the necessary skills and gainful earnings that can be obtained through the attainment of higher education qualification.

In Nigeria, several factors have been attributed to the poor access of youth to higher education across the nation. For instance, the Federal Ministry of Education (2009) asset that following the National University Commission's policy on carrying capacity, which stipulate the policy that guides numbers of students that can be admitted for each university on yearly basis, Nigerian Universities could not admit beyond 150,000 out of about imillion potential candidates seeking admission on yearly basis. One of the factors responsible for this is the limited available funds for the maintenance of the higher education system in Nigeria. As studies have revealed, higher institutions especially the government funded institutions lack adequate funds which execrably led to other serious challenges such as poor infrastructural facilities, lack of modern equipment, poor remuneration for academic staff, lack of adequate research grants and budgetary allocation (Okebukola, 2008, Aluede et al., 2012, Kpolovie and Obilor, 2013).

As it concerns the present study, evidence from available data has revealed the problem of access to higher education as highly connected to inadequate funding of higher institutions in Nigeria, it is essential to examine through the voices of youth themselves the various conditions that impact on their access to higher education within the Nigeria setting.

Socio-economic factor and access to formal education in Africa

Despite the various efforts by various governments to ensure the participation of youth in formal education, a high number of youth in the developing economies especially those in Sub-Saharan Africa (including Nigeria) have been reported as having dropped out of school or confronted by different situations that restricted or limited their access to formal education especially to higher institutions of learning (EFA, 2006; UNESCO, 2013).

For instance, a global report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2013) directly addresses the extent of non-participation of youth in formal education. It was revealed that about 10.6% of the world youth are non-literates while about 12.1% of youth in developing countries was recorded as illiterates. Overall, about 29.6% of young people in Sub-Saharan Africa were idle, resulting in over 225 million of them not in any form of education, employment or training (UNESCO, 2013). As at 2014, the number of non-educated youth in Sub-Saharan Africa was reported to have increased to 37% (African Union, 2014).

Undoubtedly, the establishment of higher institutions serves as a major strategy in meeting global requirements for producing high level manpower to meet the desirable and sustainable socio-economic and political development in Africa (Omopupa and Abdulraheem, 2013). It is however observed that higher institutions especially the public ones are confronted with numerous problems that limit their accessibility capacity for admitting potential candidates and ensuring quality services for greater output. Significantly, empirical studies have demonstrated that children from higher socio-economic backgrounds have better chance or access to higher educational attainment than their counterparts from lower economic backgrounds. Similar to most countries in developing regions, evidence from available studies across Africa have shown that the numerous strategic policies adopted by various governments to attain sustainable literacy rates for African youth have often been thwarted by the depth of poverty level that confront most African countries (Ogujiuba, 2014). Arguably, many youth in African countries have continued to be vulnerable to the effects of poverty, keeping a high number of them out of school and others as drop-outs (UNESCO, 2014).

For instance, empirical findings from different nations of Africa such as Senegal, Sierra Leone, and the Republic of Congo have revealed that

more than half of adult population in these countries is among the working poor masses, with the highest rates of them being young women and rural youth (Hervish and Clifton, 2012). Moreover, it has been argued that a majority (over 60%) of African population is located in rural areas, often characterized by poverty and impoverished conditions (NPC, 2011; Durowaiye and Babatunde, 2015). Thus, most African rural youth are often subjected or oriented into income generating business/activities as children; a kind of practice undermines the need for children's enrollment in formal education (Akin, 2013).

Significantly, Africa is one of the highly populated continents in the world. As a consequence, the high population growth especially in the region is noticeable to be exerting extreme pressure on the limited resources in terms of housing, health and educational facilities which are most basic of human needs. For instance, evidence from a study conducted in Ghana reveals that poverty is an essential factor that shape access to higher education. As Pryor and Ampiah, (2003) unfold, after considering the households income and the financial implications of schooling, a majority of Ghanaians in this study viewed formal education as a 'relative luxury'. This apart, a number of statistical and empirical studies have affirmed the link between poverty and access to school (UNESCO, 2002; Nwaobi, 2003; Okpukpara and Odurukwe, 2003; Tahir, 2005; Bruneforth, 2006; Ofoegbu, 2009).

In a related study that examined key determinant of school drop-out in Uganda, Mike et al. (2008) identify parental educational status as key determinant to young people's access to school. The study observes that parents with high academic attainment are most likely to facilitate access for their young adults and prevent them from dropping out of school than the non-educated parents.

In addition, a review of literature on poverty situation in Nigeria presents a paradox as it is observed that despite the country (Nigeria) is

endowed with vast human and material resources, the level at which poverty is being experienced by a large proportion of Nigerian populace is pervasive, chronic and multifaceted (Omonona, 2009; Yakubu and Aderonmu, 2010; Ogujiuba et al., 2011; Ojimba, 2011). In the same vein, owing to the high levels of poverty where about 68% of the population live below poverty line (below \$1.25 per day) (UNDP, 2013) enrolment and retention of children in school by poor parents has increasingly been difficult (Ejere, 2011).

Furthermore, in a Nigeria study, Kainuwa and Yusuf (2013) examine the influence of parental socio-economic status and educational background on their children's education. It was observed that parents' level of education often determine their perceptions of the benefits associated with formal education, and their decision to enrol their children in school as well as the children's level of educational attainment.

In most West African countries, despite the progress made in achieving literacy across different age groups since the 1980s, research still found that more than 65 million young people and adults lack of access to formal education due to effect of poverty (Oxfam, 2009). As it has been well documented that in many parts of Africa, young people are often constrained by unsafe and degraded environment, poor sanitation, and lack of access to health care facilities, clothes, food and other basic amenities by virtue of their social and historical backgrounds (World Bank 2001; Adedokun, 2012; Ogujiuba et al., 2011). The effect of poverty predisposes most Africa youth to dropping out of school and raises the need for many to combine schooling with economic activities.

While findings from above studies have identified poverty related factors as obstacles to access to higher education in Africa at general level, the present study specifically examine the various possible factors that implicated on youth's access to higher institution through the perceptions of the affected group.

Essentially, the various studies that have been done in the past tend to focus on quantitative analysis of the impacts of poverty in Nigerian young people. It may be argued that an in-depth study of young people would yield a better understanding of how they are exploited or otherwise due to their socio-economic/ poverty status. It will also be interesting to view how young people's experiences have changed over time within their specific contexts. This study shall address this gap in knowledge.

The Methods

This section focuses on the methodological approach in addressing the gap in researching on the factors that implicated on youth's access to higher education in Lokojaⁱ, the state capital of Kogi stateⁱⁱ, Nigeria. This exploratory study is a part of an ongoing research that examines the various contexts that impacted on youth's access to higher education within Nigerian socio-cultural contexts.

The methodological framework considered in this study is informed by a constructionist perspective. The constructionist approach is suitable for this kind of study that "aim to include multiple voices, views and visions in the rendering of lived experiences" (Charmaz, 2000:525). Importantly, the constructionist methodological framework offers participants an exceptional privilege of making the accounts of their own life-experiences as well as interpreting such life-experiences and events (Charmaz, 2006). In one selected institution, a volunteer sample of 40 youth ages 18-28, took part in 2 focus groups (FGDs), comprising 10 male and 10 female sessions representing the in-school and in-depth interview (IDIs) comprising also of 10 male and 10 female representing the out of school. Most studies of youth draw their samples from secondary schools, and use quantitative methods. As well as using qualitative methods, the sample in this case consisted of two major groups, 'the in-school': those who are currently enrolled at a higher institution); and the

‘out of school’: those who had never attended or did not complete higher institution.

With regard to the out of school youth, the purposive and snowballing sampling methods were utilized in selecting participants for the study while cluster and random sampling were utilized for the in-school youth to minimize bias. The interviews were conducted at times and in places convenient to the respondents and took the form of informal conversations.

Analysis and Discussion of Research findings

This analysis draws on the emerging issues from the study. Data from participants reveal two major themes. The first is the participants’ conception of higher education as important aspect of their life course. The second theme is their expression of constraints that they faced in the process of seeking admission, maintaining their retention or completion of enrolments in higher education. This reveal the ways the youth negotiate their access against all odds to enroll in school and why some gave up and became school dropouts, and the coping strategies for the in-school in terms of maintenance and completions of school.

General conception of higher institutions among youth

The first emerging theme is the accounts of youth regarding their conception of higher institution as a valuable goal. Data from the FGDs and IDIs reveal that education was generally understood as beneficial for their social, emotional, and economic development. The following excerpts are representative of the responses of youth in this study:

...in our society here, going to school is a part things one must accomplish before thinking of the kind profession to choose...education mostly guarantee bright future...(FGD: Female, In-school)

Nothing can be compared to being a graduate...even when you are rich...people will still ask about your qualification...they respect you more and you have more opportunities to make wealth...(FGD: female, In-school).

Most parents find much fulfillment in seeing their children graduating from a higher institution...working in big companies...and you too feel proud that you're becoming somebody to be reckon with... (FGD: Male, In-school)

...in fact, education is a major activity in one's life and the earlier one could achieve it, the better... (FGD: Male, In-school)

...education is the best asset for any one...it is prestigious and makes you become person of high caliber... (IDI: Male, Out-of school)

...everyone knows that it is a prestigious thing to be in school and for parents to see their children becoming graduates...every family wishes to have graduates... (IDI: Male, out-of school)

...not attending any school is a very sad thing to me...although doing this carpentry work is fetching me enough money to survive but in our society, people don't see you as really important if you are not educated or working in an office... (IDI: Male Out-of school)

...My parents are not educated and that makes them to insist that everyone of us must go to school, so I'm seeking admission seriously... My elder brother got admission last year... (IDI: Male, out-of school)

The above comments reveal commonly held views by both male and female participants in the study. A majority of youth viewed formal education and particularly higher education qualification as a crucial achievement in life. It was also observed in the various terms that were used across the sample of youth to describe education as 'part things one must accomplish', 'major activity in one's life', 'what guarantee brighter future', a 'prestigious thing', what could make them to be 'of high calibre', 'work in big companies', 'an opportunity to make wealth' and so forth. From these, it could be deduced that many youth in this study conceive education as a priority for them, or what is giving them reasons to be proud among peers and representing their best hope to secure a brighter future. For instance, the biographical data of the in-school youth and some of the out of school revealed that they all had the intention to continue their education at a higher level. While it is well known that education is not compulsory at the higher level (higher institution) in Nigeria, participants generally viewed education as giving them a sense of pride and strong identity, so that most of the youth in this study, regardless of their gender, aspire to enrol in higher institution. In addition, it was surprising to observe that many participants made reference to their parents' intention to ensure that they become graduates despite the parents' lack of education. This may be probably due to the fact that Lokoja was the first administrative capital of Nigeria during the colonial era which attracted many to white collar jobs. Also, Lokoja is now the capital of Kogi state, this might have some dominant influence on the nature of works that people do and attract more prestigious or wealth than the other.

While it is expected that parents would provide for their children in many ways, such as food, clothing, shelter and financial provision for their education, some parents had insufficient resources to maintain their children in school. The following section reveals the various ways the youth were financially constrained in many ways.

Youth's Constraints in Accessing Higher Institution

One major theme emerging from this study is the significant influence of economic factors on youth's access to higher education. Most were engaged in economic or income-generating activities, or at least helped their parents to conduct family businesses such as farming and trading. This was revealed in response to the question posed on what they considered influential to their access and retention to higher education. The following responses are typical of most participants, beginning with males.

Ah, many of us wish to go to higher institution if not for the cost.....then, getting admission is tight...only private universities give admission with ease but the money require for private University is much...[FGD: Male, in-school].

...many of us are home doing nothing....and some are doing okada (motor cyclist) business to survive...I've been home for about 2 years after my secondary schoolnow am doing this apprenticeship because I was tired of staying home...but am not giving up, am still interested in going to school... [IDI: Male, out of school].

...the truth is that we all or many of us need help to be able to go school...Am out here struggling to make money.....many of us here have finished secondary school...but no admission ...and most of these schools are expensive... [IDI: Male: out-of school].

...my other siblings are also waiting for our parents to raise money...they are going to shops with my mom to assist her in selling... [FGD: Male, in-school].

....I have been doing some personal savings from my little business...I sell some products...to support my schooling and help my younger ones...if I had waited for my parents to provide

everything for me, then am not sure I will be in school today...the only problem now is that am a bit distracted from school because of the business I do... [FGD: Male, in-school].

I worked for more than 2 years before thinking of going back to school... I got admission to a private university but the money I saved wasn't enough and my parents are not really buoyant...that's why I ended up in this school...but even with that, am still having difficulties on how to cater for myself in school because I've exhausted all my savings...my close friend is having similar issue....so it's really frustrating ...I'm thinking of deferring my studentship till am able to raise enough money again... [FGD: Male, in-school].

My parents wanted me to attend university but there was no money to finance it...then admission process was tough...later I thought going to polytechnic will be cheaper but later understand that both are equally expensiveI've been home for about 2 years ...now am doing this apprenticeship because I was tired of staying home...but am not giving up, am still interested in going to school... [IDI: Male, out-of school].

Am doing this business because that's the only way out to survive for now.....I still want to go to university or poly after making some money but if I left this business, I will not have any income, so how will I survive schooling?... [IDI: Male, out-of school].

...generally people want to further their education up to higher institution but the major problem is money....higher institutions requires lots of money... most of our parents are just subsistence farmers and petty traders...then to secure admission is not easy ... [FGD: Male, in school]

...things are generally difficult...especially when you have younger ones....that's why most of us are having small businesses that could fetch us money...many of us are doing different types of some works to generate income... [FGD: Male, in school]

With reference to the accounts of youth highlighted above, socio-economic status determines a number of youth's access to higher education. Thus, earning money is of key importance among youth in this setting. As can be observed from the data, it is common for young men to engage in commercial activity such as trading, *okada* business or assist parents in farming to earn money with which they could get support for their schooling, younger ones or live more independently. As observed in this study, most young men negotiate to continue schooling in situations of hardship, while some settle for local apprenticeships or some forms of little business after finishing secondary school. Money is seen as a priority and major constraint in considering enrollment to higher education.

In addition, the above excerpts exemplify the accounts of most male participants in the ways in which they encounter difficulties in securing admission to higher institutions. Considering the comments expressed in the FGDs and IDIs by the youth, it could be said that access to higher institutions are limited in terms of number of candidates that are denied admission into higher institutions. This finding corroborates with data revealed from existing studies which indicated that a majority of those seeking admission to higher institutions are often denied on yearly basis due to carrying capacities and insufficient funds for higher institutions in Nigeria (Okebukola, 2008, Aluede et al., 2012, Kpolovie and Obilor, 2013).

Similar to the young men's accounts, excerpts from their female counterparts also reveal how they encountered financial hardships and

other complex situations as they attempted to gain access and maintaining their retention (studentships):

...I struggled hard to enter university but couldn't gain admission, so I tried admission for polytechnic...after several efforts with prayers...here I am now... [FGD: Female, in- school]

The two major problems that discourage us from going to University or any institution is the trouble with the admission process [others nodding]... [FGD: Female, in-school]

...it's really difficult to gain admission to university and you need a lot of money to cover tuition, accommodation, feeding and other allowances... [Others nodding in agreement]... [FGD: Female, in school].

...most time I have to source for money from my relatives...I also make hair for people as a stylist...I lost my mum some years back and my Dad is really trying to make things happen for us ...my fiancé has been assisting me too but I don't really enjoy taking money from men...it makes men to dominate you...they may think you are desperate... [FGD: Female, in- school]

... I just try to manage...recently I started to find it difficult to concentrate in school because I don't know how to settle my bills...there was this man I met sometimes ago... he was really assisting me financially...but I had to stop seeing him because I kept seen him with different girls...and he doesn't use safety measure (Interviewer: like what?) like condom

...so, I left him because I was afraid of STIs and HIV...
[FGD: Female, in- school]

Yes, there are hard times...most of the times I got money from my roommates and sometimes from my boyfriend...then I'm a fashion designer, I sew for people...I'm surviving... [FGD: Female, in- school].

The above data cover a wide range of economic activities including trading, fashion designer and hairdressing performed by the female youngsters in this research setting. While youth of their age may be expected to be economically dependent on their families to a large extent, 'full' parental support seems to have been limited by the low socioeconomic development of this community due to the relatively poor standard of living of most of its members, in common with many other communities in Nigeria and Africa. Moreover, the cases of young females, engaging in business to support their education provide an understanding of the considerable level of poverty affecting this community. Importantly, as observed in this study, such economic realities appeared to have significant implications for the sexual practices and negotiations of some of the female participants.

For instance, the narratives of some of the females in FGDs concerning their sexual encounters make it evident that their economic position influenced their negotiations in terms of when, how and with whom they had sex. Some of the females recounted how they were in 'dating' relationships, but had to opt out of the relationship due to unsafe sexual practices. It should be noted that a number of studies have found that young women are often made powerless or constrained due to their low economic status and the need for specific favours at some points, and putting them in disadvantage positions or limit their negotiations for safer sex (Hallman, 2004; Sipsma et al., 2010; Durowaiye and Babatunde, 2015).

In addition, similar to their male counterparts, a number of females also lamented about the difficulties often encounter in the process of seeking admission to higher institutions especially university education. This appeared as a major challenge it is well known that university education is the utmost route for any nation to build a strong workforce through various trainings and innovative researches that would contribute to national development and hence, leading to sustainable development (Roberts and Ajai-Ajagbe, 2013, Mohamedbhai, 2015).

CONCLUSION

While it could be argued that some of the studies in this review lack explanations of how the limited economic resources or poverty influenced the youth's accounts or experiences of negotiating access to higher education. The present study fill this existing gap in knowledge by paying particular attention to the neglected narratives of youth on how poverty/socio-economic condition of youth has remained an important factor in promoting inequality of access to higher education among Nigerian youth.

It is important to conclude that majority of existing studies confirm that a high population youth across Sub-Saharan Africa including Nigeria still lack access to formal education. From existing literature, one of the major factors that were found as determinant factors through which youth's access were hindered is the lack of sufficient fund for Nigerian higher institutions. It is essential to note that for Africa including Nigeria to achieve greater productivity, economic growth and sustainable MDGs, there is imperative need to increase their workforce/human resources through increase participation of youth in higher education. Thus, there is need for governments, international bodies, private sectors, and various educational stakeholders to provide adequate funds for higher institutions at all levels. This will expand their capacities for higher enrollment in terms of acquiring sufficient staff, improved infrastructure, and quality of output.

As findings from this study revealed, youth's economic status were also highly determined by their socio-economic capacity. This is particularly true for those youth from low socio-economic background. Essentially, many youth were left with no choice but to engage in various types of income-generating activities for their survival and that of their families. Participants' accounts illustrated how young females can be exposed to men who exploit women sexually in exchange for money; a form of relationship that will often limit female's capacity for choice of sexual partner and safety.

Also, given the significance of economic difficulties among youth as observed in this study, it will be of great importance for governments/policy makers and international bodies to design programmes to support higher institutions in terms of funding to tackle their numerous financial problems that limit their caring capacity. In addition, there is need to assist youth particularly those from who may be interested in enrolling in higher institutions but lack the required financial capacity. Exploring a broad range of economic empowerment strategies for youth will reduce unequal access to higher education and help young females to choose the kind of partner they deserve, negotiate safer sex and reduce unsafe sexual practices attached to (unprotected) sex-for-money relationships observed in this study. This will further contribute to youth empowerment to improve our nation's economy and the sustainability of the level of development reached in our country.

Over all, the state of higher education in Nigeria and across African countries demands the development of institutional strategies to enhance access for youth as this remains a major way to achieving sustainable development in Africa.

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ⁱLokoja is a city in central Nigeria, called the middle-belt zone and is the capital city of Kogi State with a population of about 195, 261 people (NPC, 2006). Lokoja is one of the capitals oldest cities in Nigeria before it became the state capital in 1991 (Kogi State Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 1991). Lokoja was the first administrative capital of Nigeria and now the capital of Kogi state. There are basically three main ethnic groups and languages in Kogi state; these are the Okun, Igala and Ebira. It has a total area of 29,833km² and a total population of 3,595,789 (1991 Census cited in KOSEEDS, 2004).

ⁱⁱKogi State was created on 27th August, 1991 to become one of the 36 states that make up the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The state was formally a geopolitical unit known as Kabba Province under the British administration (KOSEEDS, 2004) and made of 21 local government areas.